

**Minutes of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities
Scrutiny Board**

**25th January, 2018 at 5.00pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Edis (Chair);
Councillors Goult and Hevican (Vice-Chairs);
Councillors Allcock, Ashman, R Price and Underhill.

Apologies: Councillors Phillips and White.

In attendance: Alison Knight (Executive Director – Neighbourhoods);
Alan Caddick (Director – Housing and Communities);
Stephen Gabriel (Service Manager – Housing
Management);
Neville Rowe (Housing Strategy and Research
Manager);
Kevin Tebbett (Business Manager – Housing Options).

1/18 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 23rd November, 2017 be approved as a correct record.

2/18 **Preparing for the Homelessness Reduction Act**

The Service Manager – Housing Management delivered a presentation to the Scrutiny Board on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, its implications for the Council and for our residents, the policy context and to explore some of the likely outcomes. The Act was the biggest change in homelessness legislation for over 20 years and represented a change in focus on prevention.

The Act would take effect from 3rd April, 2018 and introduced three major new duties:

- Assess all eligible applicants and agree an individual Personal Housing Plan;
- To take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness;

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- To relieve homelessness by helping the applicant to secure accommodation.

A duty to refer within the Act had been deferred until October as there were still discussions nationally on which agencies should be included within this duty.

The prevention duty applied to applicants threatened with homelessness within 56 days; previously this had been 28 days.

The relief duty lasted for a period of 56 days but could come to an end before that time if an applicant had suitable accommodation likely to last for at least six months, refused an offer of suitable accommodation or deliberately and unreasonably refused to co-operate with the relief process.

It was anticipated that there would be a likely increase in demand on services in both number of presentations and the time and resources needed for each case dealt with. The Council would be ready and compliant with the requirements of the Act, but there would be ongoing work within the Council and with partners to bring about a continuing change in culture to meet the strong focus on prevention within the Act.

Council officers were liaising with counterparts at one of the 'Trailblazer' authorities, Southwark, which had been implementing the requirements of the Act for the past 12 months. Southwark had reported an increase in homelessness presentations, but a reduction in acceptances and reviews, with an increase in preventions. Key messages from the experience of Southwark included the importance of partnership working.

From the comments and questions by members of the Scrutiny Board the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- Homelessness cases in Sandwell had remained stable over the last three years and it was anticipated that statistics for the current financial year would continue that pattern.
- The most common cause of homelessness in Sandwell was parents/relatives no longer being willing to accommodate, followed by termination or loss of an assured shorthold tenancy.
- Relationship breakdowns were also a cause of homelessness. Where these involved violence, housing officers worked with appropriate Domestic Violence colleagues to get support.

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- As Sandwell was part of the Asylum Seeker Dispersal Programme, there were numbers of households presenting as homeless because of the loss of National Asylum Seeker Service accommodation.
- A series of personalised Personal Housing Plans were being created. It was estimated that at least ten variations would be required to suit different groups of people including care leavers, victims of domestic abuse and people suffering from mental illness.
- It was important to ensure the preparation of Personal Housing Plans was done correctly, without pressure upon the officer working with the applicant to rush or skip over elements. It was reported that there would be a role within the service looking at quality and carrying out audits to make sure the Plans were of the expected quality. Quality expectations would be clearly communicated to staff.
- Referring organisations should make informed referrals to be factored into the Personal Housing Plan for the applicant, not just signpost the applicant over to Housing officers.
- The Act placed a specific duty on customers presenting as homeless to take steps to either prevent or relieve their homelessness. These obligations would be detailed in a customer's individual Personal Housing Plan.
- The draft Prevention of Homelessness Strategy had not yet been agreed by Cabinet and had been proactively brought to the Scrutiny Board by officers in advance of a decision being made. It was felt that the draft Strategy could be considered in further detail by the Housing working group of the Scrutiny Board prior to the report being submitted to the Cabinet.
- While the list of agencies with a duty to refer was still being discussed nationally, the Council was already engaging with key partners locally.
- Under the relief duty, if an applicant refused a suitable offer of accommodation or an offer of a six-month tenancy the duty would cease and they would no longer be eligible.

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- It was important that it was understood that a “suitable offer” of accommodation would not always be in the exact area that an applicant may prefer, but this did not prevent it being “suitable” to meet their needs.
- It would be necessary to use accredited private sector landlords to discharge the duties to complement other sources of accommodation and the Council was working with landlords in Sandwell to achieve this. It was reported that the Council had positive relationships with many landlords through the Landlords Forum.
- The Council could offer incentives to landlords that would work with us to help discharge homelessness duties and were willing to charge the Local Housing Allowance rate for 12 months. This included offering a rent guarantee, contact with officers for the landlord and support to the tenant for a period if required to help encourage sustainability of tenancy.
- A virtual outreach team was being developed to address rough sleepers in Sandwell. This would seek to determine the extent of rough sleeping in the borough, where it happened and who the Council worked with on the issue.
- There was emergency cold weather provision in place to help rough sleepers during extreme weather. The Board requested that information on the provision be provided to councillors.
- The possibility of engaging people who could share lived experience with applicants was being investigated.
- A workshop had been scheduled with representatives of all key partners to discuss the draft Prevention of Homelessness Strategy.
- The Council worked with a range of organisations to help get support for people who had English as a second or other language, this included the local charitable organisation Brushstrokes.
- The Council would urge people experiencing housing problems to approach it as soon as possible as it would potentially help prevent someone becoming homeless.

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- The Council had money advisers who, for example, could help applicants negotiate with lenders which could prevent cases of homelessness and help households take control of their finances.
- Further analysis of the impact of age-restricted stock on the Council's ability to offer suitable accommodation to certain age groups was needed.
- The Council had secured a specialist Local Government Association advisor to help review homelessness services.
- The Service Manager – Housing Management represented Sandwell on a taskforce of the West Midlands Combined Authority that was working on homelessness.

The Board thanked officers for attending the meeting.

Resolved that the Housing Working Group of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board consider the draft Prevention of Homelessness Strategy prior to it being submitted to Cabinet.

(Meeting ended at 6.11pm)

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